“Sounding Harry Out”:
Socio-cultural Aspects of Teaching English through Movies

Kyushu Sangyo University  Peter Carter
Kurume University  Hina Miyauchi

Introduction

In this paper, we shall investigate an area we consider critical to enhancing the appreciation of movies: gaps in socio-cultural knowledge. This is an important topic to address with our students as it moves us from a situation in which we think about what is happening on screen, to why it is happening. The social context of language can be described as having three distinct parts: the field of discourse, the tenor and the mode. In movies, we could say that the field of discourse is what subject the characters are talking about. The tenor refers to the speakers themselves, and how they relate to each other. The mode of discourse is the pragmatic functions the speakers use to convey their meanings. To only focus on the field of the discourse is, however, to limit our students’ ability to decode the subtle nuances inherent in the other two discourses. Knowledge of tenor and mode is transferable from movie to movie, and increases students’ ability to understand so much more than just what a film’s characters are talking about. This is where the gaps in our students’ knowledge exist, and where we can help them the most.

We focused on one movie, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, due to its popularity and broad appeal. Although one could argue this is not a “realistic” movie, we are convinced that the themes, such as school days, friendship, and growing pains, are universal. Other studies
using popular culture have noted that while settings may vary from the
everyday to the exotic, scripts are always a reflection of how professional
writers believe natural dialogue takes place.

As native speakers of our own languages, but also as teachers, we
often take socio-cultural factors for granted. We therefore believe that
before we try to use movies in the classroom, we need to examine our own
assumptions. The assumptions we hold are embedded in our psyche and
linked to our cultural identity from an early age. These very much affect the
tenor and mode of discourse in our daily lives, and therefore should be of
use and interest to our students. What we want to do is to find ways to
convey this information to teachers so that the students may begin to
develop their own appreciation of social context discourse.

To do this, our project initially look at connotations in two simple
ways, names and accents, and possible links between them, before moving
on cross-cultural dimensions by analyzing the subtitles and dubbing. We
want to see what gaps in socio-cultural knowledge there may be between
native and non-native speakers, and how the film deals with them.

1) Names

The author of the Harry Potter series makes use of a number of
cultural connotations in naming her characters. Some of these are only
apparent to British audiences, while others are obvious to a wider number
of native speakers.

Writers have long known that the names they give their characters
will be subject to the audience's perceptions of those names. As an
example, a French sounding surname in England carries certain upper-
class connotations. In the late middle-ages, families of French descent
anglicized the pronunciation of their names (and sometimes the spelling,
too). A more recent trend has been for middle-class families to give a
French pronunciation to an English name. In British literature, authors
often use these empathetic connotations to steer the reader's perception of
the character. An upper-class character may have a distinguished-sounding
family name, while a working class one is very unlikely to.
A simple example would be the names of main characters in popular writing. All the way back to Beowulf, heroes have had names imbued with much more positive connotations than those of their enemies. This continues right across time: Shakespeare, Malory, Dickens, H.H. Munro, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien - all have used names to channel their readers' perceptions. The names and characteristics of main characters are so embedded in our cultural psyche now that we hardly even think about it. Effectively, the name conjures up an image.

Movies have an additional advantage in manipulating the viewers' empathy - accents. However, the things we take for granted (a kind of NS narrative schema) may not cross cultural boundaries. It could well be worth the time to go through this with our students. An increased awareness will prove useful in any number of books or movies in differing genres.

2) Accents

With regard to accent, it is noticeable in movies how often a certain accent is linked to a certain type of character. In U.S. films, there are a surprising number of arch-villains played by British actors who use R.P. In the movie Harry Potter, the R.P. speakers tend to be those with forceful characters. While all accents can be said to have both positive and negative connotations, it is interesting to see how the casting uses accents to good effect. One thing that stands out is that modified R.P. and R.P. speakers rarely get on well, at least at first in the case of Harry, Ron, and the R.P. speaking Hermione. Most scenes in the movie that contain friction between characters involve R.P. and non-R.P. speakers.

We believe that a lot of the interplay between the characters can be viewed through a socio-cultural perspective, and that if teachers are able to recognize this, they will be better able to help their students. To put this in another way, the writer wants us to believe something about each character. Therefore, she chooses the name and the accent to reinforce her intended image. The character's personality is encapsulated, and the tenor and mode of their discourse will be affected by this as well as by the field.
"Sounding Harry Out": Socio-cultural Aspects of Teaching English through Movies

Table I (The Connotation of Name and Accent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Connotation (name)</th>
<th>Accent</th>
<th>Connotation (accent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>common, decent</td>
<td>modified R.P.</td>
<td>average, not noticeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potter</td>
<td>common, decent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermione</td>
<td>upwardly-mobile (parents)</td>
<td>R.P.</td>
<td>educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snape</td>
<td>sounds very negative</td>
<td>R.P.</td>
<td>powerful, commanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petunia</td>
<td>snobby</td>
<td>R.P. &amp; hyperlact</td>
<td>appearance-conscious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hagrid</td>
<td>n/r</td>
<td>rural (South-Western)</td>
<td>loyal, slow, lower-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGonagall</td>
<td>“Mc” often = Scots / Irish</td>
<td>Scots English</td>
<td>strict, direct, no-nonsense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver Wood</td>
<td>n/r</td>
<td>prestige Scots English</td>
<td>educated, articulate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seamus</td>
<td>Irish male’s name</td>
<td>Irish English</td>
<td>low-prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malfoy</td>
<td>Mal = bad</td>
<td>R.P.</td>
<td>upper-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filch</td>
<td>Filch = to steal secretly</td>
<td>n/r</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fudge</td>
<td>Fudge = to cover up / deceive</td>
<td>n/r</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voldemort</td>
<td>Mort = death</td>
<td>n/r</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Comments regarding Socio-cultural Knowledge for Teachers)

① There is a strong correlation between what the audience will assume from a character’s name and what they will assume from their accent. In general, those with relatively common names will speak modified R.P. or regional dialects. Those whose names are marked with class connotations are more likely to be R.P. speakers.
② The movie confirms and expands on the assumptions a British reader might make. It is never stated in the book, but we assume Seamus is Irish, which he is in the movie, and also we might guess Neville is from the North - and he is. We would guess that Petunia speaks RP, and that Malfoy would too. It’s really unlikely Hagrid speaks quickly. Hermione is really not likely to have an accent other than RP.
③ R.P. speakers are notable for the force of their personalities. The R.P. speakers in the movie, for example, Hermione, Professor Snape, Petunia, Percy Weasley, all exhibit strong characters.
④ Speakers of modified R.P. are less demonstrative and more homogeneous. The modified R.P. speakers (Harry, Ron, the Weasley twins)
are less externally strong. They tend to be quietly determined rather than overtly domineering.

5 Speakers of regional dialects reinforce the stereotypical view of their background. Hagrid’s south-western accent typifies the impression of people who are known for their loyalty, but not their articulateness or speed of thought. McGonagall’s Scots English is matched by her performance as a strict, no-nonsense type of person. Seamus and Neville, Irish and northern respectively, often have or cause accidents, and are not the most academically gifted characters in the movie (which is even more true in the book, perhaps) and this is a reflection of how southerners see such people.

3) Cross-cultural Dimensions: Names

As we have seen, names are closely related to the characters’ roles or their identity. Unfortunately, however, the connotations associated with names given to characters disappear when they are transcribed into Japanese. If Chinese characters were used for the translation of the names, they might be able to express the author’s intended connotations. Unlike Chinese culture, however, Japanese has chosen a convenient way, i.e. to use “katakana”, which is a representation of “sound”, so it does not convey as much nuance of the characters’ names as English can. Katakana does not give the connotation of, e.g. “Mal” of “Malfoy” or the “mort” in “Voldemort” and the meaning of “Filch”. Neither can it convey the cultural connotations inherent in British society.

If both Japanese and native teachers realize such socio-cultural connotations and focus on the names in the classroom, it will become good “consciousness-raising” work in a number of ways: Japanese students will know that, firstly, English names also have some meanings as Japanese names do and names in Britain are often related to class consciousness, and by extension, that not only names but also words are composed of pieces of meaning. The explanation of “suffix” and “prefix” will be more useful and interesting through the characters’ names.
4) Cross-cultural Dimensions: Accents

Even more so than names, accents convey a lot of meanings. By analyzing those varieties, teachers can find socio-linguistic or cultural factors they had not previously noticed. Those findings will also be useful, in order for students to think about how languages are used or what the functions of speaking are, when they use not only English but also their native language. These are the socio-cultural gaps between English and Japanese dubbing.

In the dubbed version, male modified R.P. speakers sound a little effeminate. It is said that there are no “social dialects” in Japanese (Long, 1997). Even if there are any, they are regarded as being few and very slight. Therefore, when Japanese translate British English, which has a number of social dialects, they have to represent the differences in speech in their own way. As for the translation of men’s speech, the difference in background between characters is shown by the degree of how much gender-exclusive/preferential men’s words are used. The higher the speaker’s status is or the more they are educated, the more formal the language they use. The more formal or standardized the language becomes, the less frequently gender-exclusive/preferential men’s words are included. For example, in comparison to Harry and Malfoy, Hagrid uses a lot of gender exclusive words.

However, interestingly, comparing R.P. and modified R.P. speakers, R.P. speakers use a few more gender exclusive suffixes in the Japanese translation. For example, Dudley and Malfoy use gender exclusive suffixes such as “zo” and “ka” when addressing Harry. Harry, however, responds in standard (gender-neutral) forms of Japanese, which makes him sound a little effeminate. As Holmes explains, this would be related with the socio-linguistic factors in modern Japanese. She says, “in modern Japanese, these distinctions” between the vocabulary items used by women and men, such as ‘onaka’ versus ‘hara’, “are more a matter of degrees of formality or politeness than gender”, “so the ‘men’s’ forms are restricted to casual contexts and considered macho or coarse, while the ‘woman’s’ forms are used by everyone in public contexts”. As we already
found that the modified R.P. speakers tend to be “nicer” (hierarchically less powerful) characters in (3) and (4) of the previous section, in order to show the difference, the Japanese translation of their speech tends to be more standard.  

The dubbing also tries to account for Hagrid’s accent, using a synthetic composite. Japanese has a lot of regional accents but there is the difficulty of appropriation of Japanese for Hagrid’s speech. Because regional accents do not basically convey social status, the translator cannot fit one regional dialect to his speech. Without using any existing regional accents, it is difficult to translate Hagrid’s type of speech into Japanese, trying to show his status, role and personality. After analyzing his dubbed speech, we found two interesting results: one is that the dubbing was using a synthetic composite and the other is that, as we already showed it above, his speech is filled with gender-exclusive words, which suggests “non-standard, non-educated”.  

His dubbing is sprinkled with various Japanese regional dialectal features from all over the country. He uses a suffix of “-chimau” (=“-te-shimau”), which is used in the eastern and northern part of Japan, especially in Chiba, Ibaragi, Nagano and Fukushima. He also uses “-choru” (= “teiru”) as a suffix, which is mainly used in Kyushu, the southern part of Japan. In addition to suffixes, vocabulary is also chosen from various areas and put into his speech. For example, he uses the word of “chitto” (forward stressed) for the meaning of “a little”, which is used in Saga and Hyogo. In order to show his lower-class status, his dubbing employs a lot of gender-exclusive male words. For example, he uses “hara” for “stomach”, “suman” for “I’m sorry”, and “shiri” for “bottom” and so on. This style of speech helps to show his lower-status.  

Dumbledore’s style of speaking has been dubbed into a style familiar to Japanese viewers. Dumbledore’s speech uses a stereotypical speech style of “old men”. He uses the suffix for them like “-ja” and “-no” and also calls himself “washi”. This type of speech for old people is often seen or heard in Japanese cartoons and books, so Japanese tend to take it for granted as “all” the old people use such words in a real life. When it is analyzed carefully, however, it will be soon clear that this is not the “common” way
they speak and that it is really a well-selected speech pattern for the old characters. For example, Japanese dialect dictionary explains the places are only Toyama, Gifu and Hyogo, where the suffix of “-ja” is used by old people. The word “washi” is also used only in Tottori and Okutama by old people. As Holmes explains, as people get old, they tend to use more vernacular types of speech. In other words, because Japanese cannot use the only one regional accent for the dubbed translation (as with Hagrid’s speech), they might have to select carefully the way of speech for older characters as a general default speech pattern by “creating” one from fragments of regional accents.

Orthography is taken into account in the subtitles. This is more common in the book. Hagrid has difficulty in spelling, and the book reflects this. In the movie, his spelling of Happy Birthday (Happee Birthdae) is highlighted in the subtitles, through a deliberate reduction of the vowel length “otanjobi omedeto”, instead of “otanjoubi omedetou”.

Conclusion

One of the benefits of teaching English through movies is that teachers can teach students the role of the target language from not only the discourse level but also the pragmatic level. In order to deal with such a depth of language use, it is necessary for teachers to recognize the socio-cultural gaps between the target language and the native language. Especially in this essay, we picked up on the socio-cultural aspects teachers tend to ignore, names and accents, and tried to show the gap between British and Japanese culture through one movie, *The Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*.

Focusing on only what is happening on the screen is not as involving as why characters/performers do what they do. For a better understanding of reasons, we need to look at nuance and connotations. Connotations need cross-cultural perspective, and therefore we recommend a teacher from the same cultural background as the students working with one from the place of origin of the movie concerned. Teachers would do well to work with people of other nationalities when planning to use
movies. By working together, teachers can increase each others’ knowledge, and thereby help their students.

■ Notes

1 It should be noted that the R.P. (Received Pronunciation) and modified R.P. designation is a relative one, as the actors appear to have softened their accents to a certain extent, presumably in order to appeal to non-British viewers. Therefore, what we have called R.P. is really a listener-friendly approximation. The social distance between the accents is preserved.

2 See Holmes, 152.

■ References

『現代日本語方言大辞典』 平山輝夫ほか編、Vol. 1-9、東京：明治書院、1992.3-1994.6。
柴田 武『日本の方言』 (1958) 東京：岩波新書、2003年。
Abstract

Sounding Harry Out: Socio-cultural Aspects of Teaching English through Movies

*Peter Carter and Hina Miyauchi*

This paper will look at socio-cultural aspects of the movie that we consider critical to enhancing the appreciation of movies: that is, "gaps" in socio-cultural knowledge. As is often the case, native speakers or language teachers tend to take socio-cultural factors for granted. But in order to understand the target or native language well they are very important, because they convey reasons or help explain the way the story goes. To illustrate this, we chose *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* as our target movie and focused on British and Japanese linguistic contexts.

First, we will identify two key areas, names and accents, and then we will look at ways in which the Japanese version of the movie has attempted to accommodate these aspects. We will find the factors lying beneath two cultures or languages. Throughout the paper, we provide ideas for teachers who wish to improve their students’ socio-cultural knowledge.